

OVERVIEW

COVID-19 transmission remains a concern in our communities, and CPSA strongly recommends COVID-19 vaccination to anyone who is eligible. While COVID-19 vaccination is not mandatory in Alberta, an increasing number of schools, businesses and jurisdictions are now requiring students, staff and visitors to be fully vaccinated. This is driving an increased number of Albertans to clinics to request medical exemptions from COVID-19 vaccination.

CLINICAL DECISION-MAKING

CPSA continues to review the latest information on contraindications and precautions for COVID-19 vaccination. We advise physicians to inform their decision-making based on the [recommendations](#) from the Alberta Health Services COVID-19 Scientific Advisory Group and to familiarize themselves with the latest resources (see page 3) set out by Alberta Health, the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Physicians have access to readily available information about specific conditions for certain patients for whom a first or second dose of COVID-19 vaccine should be recommended. It is clear the COVID-19 vaccine is safe and effective for nearly every individual aged 12 or older. There are no medical conditions that would universally warrant a complete exemption from initial COVID-19 vaccine. A patient's or physician's individual moral objection to vaccination is not considered sufficient clinical rationale for exemption of vaccination against COVID-19.

COVID-19 VACCINATION DURING PREGNANCY

COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective for pregnant individuals and their babies, with mRNA vaccines being the safest type of COVID-19 vaccine to get during pregnancy. Patients may get the vaccine at any time, during any trimester, of pregnancy. A viral vector vaccine may be offered to pregnant individuals when other COVID-19 vaccines are contraindicated or inaccessible. AHS is reporting that the fourth wave of COVID-19 and the Delta variant could have significant adverse effects on unvaccinated pregnant patients:

- In August 2021, six pregnant Albertans were admitted to ICU due to COVID-19. All of them were unimmunized. Only seven pregnant Albertans were admitted to ICU for COVID-19 during the entire first year of the pandemic from March 2020 to March 2021.
- In the six cases that AHS saw in August 2021, COVID-19 had severe impacts on the parents' health and also the child's. Five preterm births occurred as early as 29 weeks.
- Pregnant patients are at a higher risk of severe disease and complications, such as ICU admission requiring ventilation and preterm birth. The threshold for admission is lower and they can get sick faster.
- Pregnant women with co-morbidities such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease are potentially at higher risk of severe COVID-19 disease.

MANAGING CHALLENGING INTERACTIONS

CPSA supports physicians who, after an assessment, decline to issue exemptions when the patient making the request does not have a warranting medical condition. Physicians are expected to entertain exemption requests from their patients and cannot adopt blanket refusal policies toward patients who request vaccination exemptions.

Interactions with patients on this topic may become emotional and difficult. If a patient becomes abusive toward a physician, staff member or other patients because a vaccination exemption request is denied, that patient may be asked to leave the premises. Physicians are not expected to tolerate this type of behaviour and have the right to immediately discharge patients who act in this manner from their practice under the [Terminating the Physician-Patient Relationship](#) standard of practice.

To avoid potential conflict with upset patients, CPSA is supportive of clinic staff screening patients before their arrival to determine if the nature of the visit is related to an exemption request. In some instances, these types of assessments may be conducted virtually to avoid an in-person confrontation. For assessments that must be conducted in-person, physicians may want to employ a buddy system to avoid being alone in a room, or advise the patient that they will be contacted at a later date, by phone, with a decision.

EXPECTATIONS FOR EXEMPTIONS

A physician's informed clinical judgement that an exemption from COVID-19 vaccination is appropriate for a patient is expected to be exceedingly rare and must be thoroughly documented in the patient's chart. Physicians are expected to reassess COVID-19 vaccine exemptions periodically to account for updates to vaccination evidence and the potential emergence of newly-approved vaccines. Issuing "blanket" or "lifetime" exemptions would be considered unprofessional.

In the rare event a physician provides a patient with an exemption from COVID-19 vaccination, the physician should use the vaccine exemption form (available in the physician portal) to clearly state in writing:

- The patient's name and contact information;
- The physician's name, registration ID and contact information;
- Confirmation that a medical reason exists warranting an exemption to be given; and
- A date by which the exemption expires and/or a date for reassessment.

PATIENTS PARTICIPATING IN COVID-19 VACCINE OR TREATMENT TRIALS

Patients who are participating in a Health Canada authorized COVID-19-related clinical trial may request exemption from COVID-19 vaccination. In order to successfully contemplate these requests, physicians should expect the patient to provide:

- proof that the trial appears on Health Canada's authorized [list](#) of COVID-19 vaccine and treatment trials;
- proof that the patient is registered as a participant in the authorized trial;

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- a statement from a medical representative of the holder of the trial authorization describing why participation in the clinical trial requires the patient not to be partially or fully vaccinated against COVID-19; and
- a date by which the patient’s participation in the clinical trial is expected to conclude.

Exemptions that are granted on these grounds should be time-limited and the vaccination exemption letter should clearly indicate a date of expiry.

VACCINATION STATUS AND PATIENT CARE

Physicians and medical clinic staff may ask about a patient’s vaccination status as part of their point-of-care risk assessment. However, patients who are not fully vaccinated cannot be denied care. Clinics are obligated to follow strict Infection Prevention and Control Standards. These measures are designed to offer protection from transmission in the absence of staff or patient vaccination.

Clinics may undertake COVID-19 prevention strategies, which may include the use of barriers, requiring mask use by staff and patients, arranging for virtual care, postponing non-urgent visits and scheduling appointments.

EVIDENCE-BASED ADVICE

The professional advice patients receive from their physicians is very likely to inform discussions with their schools, workplaces and businesses they visit. Knowing this, it is critical for advice from physicians on COVID-19 vaccination to be rooted in the latest evidence. All Albertans, including the rare few who would qualify for an exemption from COVID-19 vaccination, must also receive accurate and founded advice on how to mitigate risk in their communities. An exemption from COVID-19 vaccination should not be misinterpreted as a “free pass,” and the patient should be made aware of their elevated risk of acquiring, transmitting and experiencing severe outcomes from COVID-19.

CPSA continues to encourage all physicians to advocate in favour of public health precautions, such as indoor masking, physical distancing, monitoring for symptoms and heightened hygiene practices.

RESOURCES

1. [CPSA Patient FAQ: Exemption Requests for Vaccination](#)
2. [CPSA FAQ: Mask Use Exemption Letters](#)
3. [CPSA Patient FAQ: Exemption Requests for Mandatory Masking](#)
4. Alberta Health Services COVID-19 Scientific Advisory Group Rapid Brief. [Medical Exemptions for COVID-19 Vaccine: Jurisdictional Scan](#). September 7, 2021.
5. National Advisory Council on Immunization: [Statements and Publications](#).

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6. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [COVID-19 Vaccine Information for Specific Groups](#).
7. Alberta Health. [COVID-19 Vaccine Questions and answers for the public and healthcare practitioners](#). July 13, 2021.
8. University of Waterloo School of Pharmacy. Focused Communication. [COVID-19 Vaccine Medical Exemptions](#). September 26, 2021.